BOOK REVIEWS

MAN OF THE CENTURY: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF POPE JOHN PAUL II by Jonathan Kwitny (NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1997). xii-754 pp. $30.00 hardback.

Of the many biographies today in English dealing with the life and work of the Pope, this is the most perceptive. For seventeen years Kwitny was a feature writer of the *Wall Street Journal*, and he spent four years researching this book, a fine example of investigative reporting. He undertook the book because, after an extensive career covering the Cold War and its aftermath, he was convinced that John Paul II's non-violent tactics — in contrast to the power politics of East and West — had played the most significant role in the downfall of Soviet Communism.

The meat of the book focuses mainly on Wojtyla's decades-long struggle against totalitarianism in Poland, first by the Nazis and then by the Communists. In this confrontation John Paul II developed beyond the programs of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., to become the leader of a world peace movement. An important feature of Kwitny's book is that it displays the development of Wojtyla's religious vision as he is buffeted by secular challenges over the years. In the course of time he becomes a leading European philosopher focusing on the dignity of human beings and their right to freedom of conscience. Kwitny's generous citations from Wojtyla's writings help us to follow this growth in his thinking.

The most poignant section of the Pope's biography is Book Five, "Judgments" (pp. 599–678). This concentrates on the Pope's confrontation with liberal Western capitalism and its secularist, consumerist culture. He opened this "second front" in 1989 after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. Kwitny's narrative here is largely a chronicle of seeming failure. Although intending to focus on extra-ecclesial issues such as evangelization, ecumenism, and solidarity with men of good will to solve world problems, the Pope's need to deal with serious doctrinal and disciplinary challenges within the Church largely undercut this new program. The main bone of contention centered mostly on sexual and gender issues which stimulated a widespread anti-papal coalition both inside and outside the Church. Ironically, however, Kwitny rounds out this "losing battle" of the Pope with a disturbing catalogue of the modern West's moral deterioration (pp. 674–678).

Whatever may be John Paul's tribulations of the moment, Kwitny has painted the portrait of a great man whose source of inner power was derived from his religious convictions. Can his religious vision lead humanity to face the challenges of the third millennium and tip the scales against the all-pervasive secular culture and its debilitating moral influences? "The odds are overwhelmingly against him," says Kwitny. "But then again, the odds were overwhelmingly against him all along."

Rev. John F. Kobler, CP
Chicago, IL

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